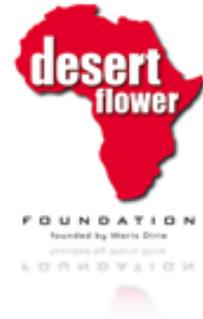




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“Ignorance is the #1 killer.”

Waris Dirie reflects on her fight against female genital mutilation (FGM).



Narrator: Waris Dirie, a child of Somali nomads who became an international supermodel, talked to Africa Regional Services about her efforts to end the practice of female genital mutilation, also known as FGM. Through her Desert Flower Foundation and a feature film by the same name telling her personal story, she strives to raise consciousness and eliminate this appalling practice. In spite of having made some headway in her fifteen-year effort, Waris points out that a lack of awareness still presents the biggest obstacle.

Waris Dirie: So what is the biggest obstacle? That is being ignored, so no one is talking about it, nobody is doing anything about this, as much as it's a terrible, terrible brutal crime that is absolutely just pushed to the side like it is nothing. Ignorance is the number one killer.

Narrator: Waris adds that there are many reasons, cultural or otherwise, why the practice continues to persist.

Waris Dirie: One is because [an uncut woman] she's unacceptable and it's unclean, and the society will not accept her, and you know, she's an outcast; second she can never be married and you know, be part of the community and it's just all these myths going on.

Narrator: A victim of FGM herself, Waris recognizes how difficult it can be to change societal norms.

Waris Dirie: It's okay, it's normal for them. It is so normal including my own family...I just came from, came from my family who lives in Somalia, and my younger brother, my baby brother, has six daughters, baby daughters. Two of them I ran and got them, I got two of them, but the other five who are very small are absolutely in danger and the mother and the father are fighting every day saying “you must be out of your mind if you don't think we are not going to mutilate our daughters – they gonna run around looking like that!” This is what I gotta deal with, my own, my own family!

Narrator: Waris stresses that female genital mutilation presents a huge roadblock for the advancement of women and for the societies that practice it.

Waris Dirie: This is a terrible thing, and it's bringing the whole country down because there is no level of respect when you are mutilating your daughters and your women, and you will never go up. You'll never grow higher! Nothing good will happen!

Narrator: Waris believes that stopping FGM will require concerted action, education, and leadership.

Waris Dirie: It needs more than me, it needs the whole world. It needs serious education. But it's not enough, my friend, it is not enough. We need the politicians, we need the Imams, we need the Pope. We need all these people, these so-called leaders. I don't believe that an organization can change anything in the world. I think it is definitely individuals. Let's say, just one president of Africa, if he says, "Stop this FGM! Never again, and [you] shall be banished if you be caught," I guarantee you, my friend, there will be a big difference tomorrow. I believe Africa will shine if this comes to the end.

Narrator: We have reached the end of our podcast. We'd like to thank Waris Dirie and the Desert Flower Foundation, and we welcome back our listeners to future Africa Regional Services podcasts.